

# Employment of the Mentally Retarded and the Mentally Restored

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**A** CHALLENGE of great national magnitude and deep human significance is the employment of two kinds of misfortune-struck citizens: the mentally retarded and the mentally restored.

Throughout the nation there are about 5.7 million mentally retarded persons, more than 80 percent of whom are considered educable to a useful, productive life. Nationally, 19 million persons are estimated to suffer from a degree of mental illness warranting psychiatric help. Treated in a well-equipped, well-staffed hospital, 7 of 10 mental patients are considered restorable to useful, productive lives. Several very good reasons follow for directing greater national effort toward caring for and rehabilitating the mentally retarded and the mentally restored.

*Humanitarian reasons.* Immeasurable human anguish and unhappiness exist among the retarded and the mentally ill and their families. Much of this heartache is unnecessary.

*Economic reasons.* The nation is denied several billion dollars of economic output because of underachievement, underproduction, or incapability among the retarded and the mentally ill. The cost of caring for these people is tremendously high—and much of the cost is needless because they have a potential for productivity.

*National policy reasons.* A Presidential directive requires Federal administrators to consider employing these persons to the extent possible without creating extra jobs especially for them, without scuttling the merit system, and without compromising the efficiency of our work force in accomplishing our missions.

The persistence of false images of the mentally ill obstructs progress and impedes public cooperation in integrating them into our national life. Let us begin by putting the problem into proper perspective. At all times we live among, work with, and employ persons of varying degrees of stability and competence. People with mental problems come from all walks of life, all intellectual levels, all economic levels, all geographic areas, and from all backgrounds and traditions.

Answers to the following four questions constitute my discussion.

What is mental retardation, and are the retarded employable?

What is mental illness?

What is the degree of recovery at which the mentally ill can be productively re-employed? What are the recognizable signs or symptoms that an employee may be becoming mentally ill or that a mentally restored employee may be having a relapse?

## Mental Retardation

Mental retardation is not a disease, a total absence of skill or aptitude, a stigma, or a "sure case" for institutionalization. Mental retarda-

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tion is an impairment that may range from very slight to quite severe; a chronic, but usually improvable handicap; a limited—but nonetheless existing—ability to learn, to be educated, to be trained for useful, productive employment.

Several factors help determine the potential of a retardate for employment and his readiness to work.

Intelligence, usually measured by the intelligence quotient (IQ) is a yardstick, subject to all the difficulties inherent in applying yardsticks to anything other than flat walls. If we accept 85 as a mean IQ, we can classify those with lower IQ's as—

*Severely retarded or totally dependent.* Their IQ's range from 0 through 19. About 3½ percent of the 5.4 million mentally retarded are probably in this category, and no program is designed or expected to fit them for employment.

*Moderately retarded or trainable.* Their IQ's range from 20 through 49. About 11 percent of retardates fall into this category. They can benefit from specialized training programs to the extent of developing self-care competence and simple skills, enabling them to live in the community and to achieve semiproductivity in a sheltered setting.

*Mildly retarded or educable.* Their IQ's range from 50 through 69, and 85 percent of all the mentally retarded fall into this category. With the help of special educational programs, they can participate in elementary academic activities and acquire vocational skills sufficient for self-support.

A second major factor is behavior; that is, success in adjusting or adapting to the necessary environments of work, home, and community. Other factors relevant to the employability of the mentally retarded—just as they are relevant to the employability of other persons—include education, training, experience, attitude, appearance, personality, and good health.

If the right person, with intelligence equal to the required responsibilities and with the right degree of development competence, gets into the right job, he will be a productive worker. He will be an asset rather than a liability and a taxpayer rather than a public charge. In terms of human values, he will be well

worthy of the time, effort, and understanding directed toward integrating him into our national life.

I wonder whether we recognize the capability of productive employment in retardates in what we in the field of personnel administration call low-skill areas? There is no doubt about their ability to perform as a messenger, office clerk, office boy, mail handler, stock worker, kitchen helper, laundry helper, carpenter's helper, recreation and amusement worker, assembler, inspector, warehouseman, baker. I could go on for some time listing these jobs at which I know, and experience has shown, trained retardates can work very well.

Candidates for job openings in low-skill areas usually are listed at the following agencies: The U.S. Employment Service, Vocational Rehabilitation Service, sheltered workshops, occupational training centers—usually listed in telephone directories under such names as Association for Retarded, County Workshop for Retarded, Occupational Training Center, Goodwill Industries, Jewish Vocational Workshops—or public school systems sponsoring work-study programs. Job duties and requirements that can be filled by a qualified mentally retarded worker can be discussed with agency staffs. Qualified mentally retarded persons can be interviewed. After the interview, if necessary, the employer can obtain additional information on the background, training, and experience of the applicants. Then he can make his selection.

All mentally retarded persons need the certification of their local vocational rehabilitation offices before they can be hired by the Federal Government. Coordinators for employment of the handicapped, designated at major Federal installations, will assist in arranging their employment.

And what are mentally retarded workers like? They are like most other people. They look like the people you know, they act like anyone else, they are not dangerous, they can and do hold jobs, and they hold them very well.

They bring several assets to the job. They come to work dependably and on time. They are quiet, well-behaved, and in many instances less inclined to gossip or "goof off" than other employees. They take pride in their work and

try hard to please. They stick with routine better than many other workers and do little job-hopping.

They also bring some problems to the job. They think more slowly. They are not as able to act on their own when a situation changes or an unanticipated problem arises. It takes more time and patience to get them started. They have to be told the simple things that others would "catch onto." They get confused if given too many or too complicated instructions at one time.

Mentally retarded persons are oriented to the job in much the same way as any other new employee. The Vocational Rehabilitation Administration's new handbook, "So You Are Going to Supervise a Mentally Retarded Employee," has some good, practical suggestions that are helpful.

### **Mental Illness and Restoration**

Mental health is more than the absence of disease. It is that state of well-being, of positive attitude, of effective functioning that enables a person to coordinate and direct his mental, emotional, and physical faculties in day-to-day life toward accomplishment of his goals, solution of problems, maintenance of relatively good stability, adherence to generally accepted standards of conduct, reasonably favorable adjustment to environment, and, in general, fulfillment of what are considered "normal" obligations and responsibilities in work, family, and community life. Conversely, mental illness is that abnormal, irrational, or unrealistic state of being, of attitude, of functioning, that reflects someone's inability to do these things.

The causes of mental illness may be different for each person. Causes range from scarring childhood experiences; unbalanced physical, mental, or emotional development; irreconcilable interaction between inherited constitution and environment; and the acquisition of undesirable habits of thinking, feeling, and acting to various mixtures of these and other factors.

Persons who experience mental illness may be returned to mental health by psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, chemotherapy, psychosurgery,

or other methods. Mental restoration means that the person has been restored to the degree of mental health that permits him to resume his place in society; to engage again in regular, productive work; and to assume adequately normal relations with co-workers, family, and the community.

Employment is of great significance to the mentally restored person. It re-establishes his contact with reality—most important, to his "wellness"—and gives him the opportunity to become an independent, responsible member of society, integrated into the socioeconomic life of the community. Many employers, however, are afraid that hiring a mentally restored person will require too much special attention, present special training problems, or create serious problems of adjustment with co-workers. They fear instability or job-hopping, low boiling points under job pressures, and a recurrence of illness.

The findings, however, of a Veterans Administration study of mentally restored workers prove that they are good, efficient, dependable employees and that they are filling every kind of job in the labor force, ranging up to the highest skills and professions. They demonstrate excellent job stability (more than 60 percent had been in the job more than 5 years and 36 percent for 10 years or more), do work of good quality, demonstrate impressive interpersonal relations, have good safety records, and merit promotions at the same rate as other employees.

For employment of the mentally restored, an employer can contact mental hospitals in the community, community mental health centers, local public employment services, local vocational rehabilitation offices, and Veterans Administration hospitals and clinics. All provide assistance, guidance, and counseling in hiring the mentally restored.

A mentally restored applicant for Federal employment must indicate on Form 57 any history of mental illness, have his current condition medically evaluated, and be approved by the Civil Service Commission for hiring. Agency coordinators for employment of the handicapped are well versed in the specific job requirements within their own organizations and with appointment procedures.

After a mentally restored worker has been hired, how should he be treated? The only ground rule is the Golden Rule: treat him as anyone would wish to be treated. Trust him to keep hold of his emotions as anyone should do. Don't overprotect him; that slows down his comeback. Keep in mind that more is known about him than about the average employee. He has been tested, retested, analyzed, and re-analyzed by any number of professionals. When they report that this man is ready to work, their judgment can be accepted. Listen if the employee wants to talk about his former illness, but remember—big ears and a small mouth, please!

Will there be a relapse? Possibly so, possibly not. There is no guarantee that a "healthy" worker will not become ill, with the same or a different illness.

### **Recognizing Signs of Mental Illness**

Mental illness can occur in anyone. There is no way of predicting how or when or whom it will strike. For alert employers, however, certain signs or symptoms, if evaluated carefully, may help detect an approaching illness.

- Prolonged and intense sullenness, moodiness, and irritability, particularly if a change of personality occurs.

- Sharp withdrawal from contacts with friends, family members, classmates, fellow employees into a "lone wolf" type of existence.

- Comments and actions showing a deep and embittered mistrust of other people.

- Abusive and violent outbursts, with threats or even attempts to do violence to others or to himself.

- Comments and actions showing that the person believes that everyone is against him, that no one loves or cares for him.

- Too much daydreaming and fantasizing.

- A marked loss of interest in work, social activities, and ability to stick to any interest or task for a long time.

- Talk or behavior that does not make sense, indicating that the person has been "making things up in his own head" which do not seem to have any bearing on the real things that are going on around him.

- Absenteeism.
- Alcoholism.
- Accidents.
- Abuse or misuse of authority and other symptoms that reflect a dramatic change in attitude and action affecting work and employment status.

Remember, however, that a single or even several signs or symptoms do not necessarily mean mental illness. Everyone acts abnormally, irrationally, or unrealistically at times. Only when there is a series of acts of a magnitude to seriously affect work may it reflect illness.

In evaluating an obviously ill employee, two major factors need consideration: the well-being of the employee and the well-being and interest of the agency. If signs and symptoms develop to a point where it appears that something must be done, the following steps can be taken:

- Document the evidence.
- Discuss the situation with the employee.
- If discussion does not improve the situation, recommend psychiatric assistance.
- If the employee refuses assistance, the only recourse is administrative action.
- If the employee cooperates, liberal allowances of leave are recommended.
- If consultation does not resolve the situation, administrative action still will be necessary.

### **Comment**

The nation has a responsibility—indeed an obligation—to itself and its citizens to train and to educate the mentally retarded to the extent possible, to expend necessary resources in rehabilitating the mentally ill, and to employ or re-employ such individuals to benefit from their potential contributions to society.

Our success in re-integrating the mentally retarded and the mentally restored into our socioeconomic life depends significantly on every employer throughout the nation, both in government and private enterprise. Employment of these people in the right job situations serves the best interests of our citizens and the nation. It is morally right, socially just, economically wise, and administratively possible to employ them.